

The Names of Christmas

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Isaac Taylor, Aaron Markus, Griffin Jacob, Asher David, Logan Phillip. I have five sons and those are their names. Naming them was special. We wanted something that sounded good, manly, not weird; something that could be spelled easily (I could have been Geoffrey with the English spelling but I would have spent my life correcting how everyone wrote my name down or dealing with some pronouncing it, "GEE-off." And something where the initials didn't spell anything weird like COW.

We put ourselves into the names in a way. I study the Bible and love it so all the names are biblical. That's me in the name. Or, like "Markus," for example, a dear friend. "Taylor" was

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Grandma Sellers maiden name. "Logan," well, his mother lived in Boston for a time and loved it. The airport there is Logan Airport (not quite as meaning-laden as a name from the Bible but sentimental nonetheless.)

There's putting in of hope in ways. The first boy is Isaac. Isaac means laughter and our hope that he would bring laughter. Get this, there was one time when that child was nine or ten months old and we were in a pub (he was born and we lived in England at the time). My mother sneezed and he laughed so loud and hard that all the patrons got quiet and looked and smiled. Our hope was in the name. We put ourselves into the names.

I don't know that I would have appreciated being told what to name our children. There are different ways that that can happen. One common one is illustrated by a friend I once had. His name was Mark. All the first-born males in eight successive generations were named Mark. He had a whole family tree telling him what the name would be.

Mark actually broke tradition with the family and named their son, Stephen. Can you imagine the buffeting that must have taken place in that family?? Yikes.

If you can, then you are stepping into the shoes of the Joseph of the Christmas story. At least one of the shoes. When it came time to announce the baby's name he didn't say the standard, "Joseph, Jr. or Joseph III."¹ Buffeting. First Mary gets pregnant early and now this.

Others might have thought, speaking of Mary's strange pregnancy and all the gossip around it, that maybe a subtle (jaded?) point was being made. The point? It's pretty plain who a child's mother is because you see him or her emerge from her body. But it's not as self-evident who the father is. Naming might be considered the public paternity test. In naming there is claiming. So is it conceivable that in Joseph's case with no Joseph Jr. being given that some may have thought, "He'll give him a name but he is not putting his name on that birth certificate."

Joseph doesn't seem to be that kind of person. He seems to be more the kind who simply obeyed God and if God

¹ Remember Elizabeth and Zechariah naming John (the Baptist)? Upon hearing John people were quizzical since this wasn't a family name and Zechariah had to reiterate the name was John. Luke 1:62

was the Father, he could set the name and that's what Joseph would call him. ²

God sets his son's name as Jesus, meaning God Saves. If that's how God designates him, why should we think of him differently? Jesus, God he is, Saves he does.

And just as with my boys, we have variations on the names – Isaac Taylor we call Taylor; Aaron we call "Air"; Griffin gets called Griff. And so on. The Christmas story has some variations on Jesus' name, what he's called, what might be put on him. Let me point us to a couple of them, all of them which we have seen in our study so far of Matthew chapter 1 and 2.

There's the name Immanuel ... meaning ... God, not far away or back then or impersonal machine, but God with us. Not just me but us. A presence who draws near.

There's the name Christ ... meaning ... the anointed. Commissioned for and empowered for a purpose ... to save humankind, you and me ... and having all authority over heaven and earth to resource us with energy and love and strength.

There's the name Shepherd Ruler. Kings are rulers. Shepherds are rulers. But shepherd ruler tells about a style of ruling ... not a greedy politician type of ruling but a concerned for the welfare of the sheep kind of ruling. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

² In baptism, in a more nominal but still significant way, we have God being father of children entrusted to our care. What is this child's *Christian* name? Receive now from my hands, as is certainly the truth, this child from God to raise for him in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

There's the name Son of David. He fulfills the promise made once to the ancient David, that his offspring would rule and bless forever.

There's King ... we mentioned it under Shepherd Ruler before but it's more plainly given as King of the Jews ... and King of the Magi.³ I liked the person who asked how did get "over the hill without reaching the top of it?" We all want to be at the top but while we were made to reign, we were made to reign through offering ourselves to Christ. That's where the peace is, knowing the right king at the top of the hill.

There's also the names Hunted and Refugee. These show us the vulnerability of God in Christ. When we say in our pain, feeling like a dislocated shoulder about our life, "You ought to take some of this that we go through here." He says, "I have and I do." There are 65 million refugees today and he knows what they're going through.

And only a paragraph after the Christmas story in Matthew ends Jesus is called, Beloved Son ... From heaven, "This is my beloved son." That's how the story started ... Mary bearing God's son. Jesus is and God is ... not some unfeeling deity. There's tender, even faithful care ... between them and from them to you and me.

On this last day of the year it is well spent remembering the names of Christmas, the names of the Christ of Christmas. And I want you to know that God on this last day of the year has also called you son, daughter; he

³ Consider their bending the knee to the Christ in the crib and gold, frankincense, and myrrh as coronation with royal tribute. Now knowing who the real king is, they need not "obey" Herod and return to him.

remembers your name. Behold what manner of love the father has bestowed upon us that we should be called the children of God. I have redeemed you and called you by name. Your name is special to him. I John 3:1; Isaiah 43:1.

Sometimes when you are called by name is known it is not so good, like over the PA system at school and you're being called to the principal's office. But God knows your name in a *good* way. The Bible says I know you and have redeemed you and called you by name.

A+6 physician in CA wrote an essay in which he pondered a very difficult case with a child and because the illness was difficult, the child was difficult, very difficult. Despite the professionals professionalism the months of the hospitalization wore them out. Then one night the doctor came across the boy's hospital room with his tired single mom sitting by his bed. She was whispering over and over his name and saying I love you. In that moment the doctor found the boy transformed, from difficult patient to a much-loved son. He was a different child in the bed AND the doctor was different because he was seeing a son in the bed.

God's calling you by name and saying he loves you. For him your name is one of the names of Christmas.

The world is not transformed by something but by someone, someone saying, "I love you." So when I say, "Hear the word of the Lord," hear your name.

If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call.

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